"Train 'em How You Want 'em to Fight!"

Five Principles for Nurturing Initiative Before You Get to Combat

MAJ CHAD FOSTER

"Make your plans fit the circumstances."
"Never tell people how to do things. Tell them what to do and they will surprise you with their ingenuity."
— GEN George S. Patton, Jr.

On today's battlefields, initiative and adaptability are paramount. Victory in war has always required that our individual Soldiers and junior leaders possess these traits, but the burden has never been heavier on the shoulders of our young warriors. The immediate actions by a single private can have consequences that reach all the way up to the theater commander or even the President. Before the age of 24-hour news coverage and instant communications, lapses in judgment by young Soldiers or their first-line leaders might go unnoticed. Warfare in the 21st century, however, does not allow us this luxury. Although the enemy that we face today has difficulty matching us in direct tactical engagements, he adapts quickly and confronts us asymmetrically. Most commonly, he launches propaganda campaigns that attempt to erode our nation's political will, undermine international support for our efforts, and to turn the local population in the combat theater against us. When he does choose to engage us directly, he strikes hard at a detected weakness and then fades away like a ghost. The enemy is adaptable, flexible and smart, and we have to match him!

Of course, training is the key. This is how we prepare to fight, both individually and as units. The way in which we train goes a long way to determining how our Soldiers and leaders will perform when confronting the complex problems of the battlefield. In places such as Iraq and Afghanistan (and any other theater of operations to which American Soldiers will likely deploy in the foreseeable future), our young warriors will have to rapidly adjust, make decisions and act without the benefit of a field grade officer or a company commander looking over their shoulders to provide direct guidance. Soldiers, sergeants and junior officers will often be on their own in dealing with extremely complex situations. In this environment, they must be able to adapt their decisions and actions to new conditions using fundamental principles and the higher commander's intent as guides. Junior leaders will not be able to wait for instructions ... they will have to act! But how can we expect this of our privates, sergeants, lieutenants and captains if we fail to prepare them during training?

In order to get our young leaders and Soldiers ready to fight and win on today's battlefields, we must exercise mission command at all times in our training. FM 6-0, *Mission Command: Command and Control of Army Forces,* describes mission command as "*the conduct of military operations through decentralized execution based upon mission orders for effective mission accomplishment. **Successful mission command results from subordinate leaders at all echelons exercising disciplined initiative within the commander's intent to accomplish missions**. It requires an environment of trust and mutual understanding*." Put more simply, mission command is the art of balancing clear guidance in planning with flexibility in execution. As the conditions on the ground change, the original plan, either in part or in its entirety, quickly becomes invalid. The only thing that remains constant is the desired end-state (the outcome that the commander wants to achieve) and

the reason why the unit is executing the operation (the expanded purpose of the mission). It is within this context that subordinates must operate, exercising initiative as needed in the ever-changing chaos of combat.

The Principles

Mission command is the Army's preferred method of command and control (C2) on the battlefield, but far too often do we see micro-management (officially known as *detailed command*) practiced during training and, as a consequence, on the battlefield. Each time an observer/controller emphasizes a doctrinal process over a successful outcome during a tactical training exercise, initiative is crushed and the "let's just do things by the book instead of thinking" mentality is rewarded. Doctrinal tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) have their place in training, of course. A tactic usually entails the employment of one or more techniques and/or procedures. Tactics and procedures differ in that the former is descriptive while the latter is prescriptive. Procedures are done in a very specific way or sequence usually because of some technical reason. None of this is under contention, but the problem lies with the fact that many trainers treat TTPs as if they were dogmatic rules that units must follow in every situation. They teach TTPs without also teaching the "why" behind them. This is a lazy, unthinking mentality that serves only to stifle innovation and encourage rigidity in decision making. In order to counter this, we must do the opposite: **require that all our Soldiers and leaders think creatively and act with aggressiveness and common sense in the absence of exact orders.** The emphasis must be on developing the judgment to take appropriate action rather than on training only to efficiently execute battle drills or doctrinal processes. Soldiers must, above all, be relentless problem-solvers that are capable of accurately determining what must be accomplished and then formulating effective solutions that are appropriate to the specific time, place and enemy. (FM 3-0, Appendix D tells us that doctrine consists of three components: [1] fundamental principles that guide future action and decision-making, [2] established TTPs that are meant to serve as examples of "how" to accomplish specific missions, and [3] terminology and symbols. In general, most trainers focus on the latter two and almost completely neglect the first. To make matters worse, trainers often go about teaching TTPs as the "approved solutions," implying that deviation from them is somehow wrong. Nothing could be more detrimental to the development of adaptable leaders and Soldiers.)

A central prerequisite is the ability to understand the higher commander's intent and then adjust one's actions in accordance with that intent as the situation changes. In order to accomplish this, both the leader and those being led must understand the responsibilities inherent in the senior-subordinate relationship. Should either fail to do so, mission command is impossible. On the one hand, the commander must clearly articulate an intent that is detailed enough to be useful in guiding the decision-making of subordinates but that is also flexible enough to allow those subordinates the freedom to exercise creativity and innovation. From the opposite perspective, the subordinate must live up to the trust placed in him by ensuring that his actions never violate the commander's intent. This two-way obligation can be understood as "contracts" between senior and subordinate. (William S. Lind's *Maneuver Warfare Handbook* gives the best description of these "contracts," describing them as the "short-term contract" [senior's agreement to refrain from micro-management and allow subordinates the freedom to maneuver] and the "long-term contract" [subordinate's agreement to refrain from violating the senior's intent as he exercises the initiative allowed him by higher headquarters]).

The exercise of mission command, however, is an art that must be developed over time. If a commander wants to practice mission command in combat, he must prepare his officers, NCOs, and Soldiers to exercise the type of disciplined initiative described in FM 6-0. To do this, leaders must "nest" mission command into all aspects of training, especially collective training events. Only by doing this can they ensure that subordinates will be accustomed to exercising disciplined initiative and can do so during actual operations. In fact, training events should not *allow* initiative ... they should *require* it! The end-state is to build confidence in decision-making, soundness of judgment, and the habit of "making the call" in a timely manner instead of waiting around to be told what to do. However, the question remains: *how is this done*? *How do we put the concept/theory into practice*? The short answer is that there is a multitude of ways, but it always begins with the application of some basic fundamentals. Below are five simple principles that, if applied, will inject mission command into unit training events and ensure that those events nurture initiative in our Soldiers and junior leaders:

(1) "Before you start the trip, determine the destination." Mission command starts at the top. If a commander wants to train his subordinates in this manner, he must discipline himself to do it. A clear articulation of his intent is the first step. After all, how can subordinates effectively operate within the commander's intent if that intent is unclear? Before one can build a quality training event, he must determine the desired outcome. This outcome constitutes the commander's intent for training. Most will quickly say, "That is what we already do!" In reality, however, a large number of leaders start "the trip" before they have put sufficient thought into the intended "destination." Merely identifying tasks that individual Soldiers and units will execute is not enough. Those tasks must be put into context so that unit training does not devolve into "practicing for rehearsable solutions." In order to get to the end-state of producing competent, adaptive Soldiers and leaders, unit commanders must ensure that they begin by clearly defining what they want to get out of each training event.

(The concept of outcomes-based training and education [OBT&E] offers a useful guide for building training objectives that go beyond the minimalist approach of the traditional "task, conditions, standard" methodology. Currently, the Asymmetric Warfare Group [AWG] is the leading agency in advocating OBT&E for the Army, but many units throughout the Army are successfully implementing this approach in their training programs.)

(2) "WHY is just as important as HOW." Any fool can follow instructions without

thinking. If our current wars have taught us anything, it is that we need thinking leaders who can train and lead thinking Soldiers. Too many officers and NCOs approach training as if they were only teaching their subordinates how to execute a specific process, procedure or drill without ever focusing on the "why" behind each action. This is akin to teaching a person to say a sentence in a foreign language without also teaching them what the words actually mean. For a Soldier or a leader to be able to adjust in a changed situation, he has to be able to do more than execute the steps of some rehearsed drill. Soldiers that are trained only in the precise execution of drills without an accompanying focus on the purpose behind what he is doing are conditioned to expect exact instructions. They will naturally want to be told what to do and exactly how to do it. They will not act without detailed instructions or, if they do, their actions will likely be inappropriate because they are not accustomed to thinking and working independently within the intent of higher headquarters. Instead, Soldiers must be well-grounded in the "why" behind what they are doing so that when the situation changes (as it always does) they can properly adjust to the new circumstances. Without this grounding in the "why," initiative is impossible ... and without initiative on the part of Soldiers and leaders at all levels, mission command is impossible! (The Boyd Cycle — more commonly known as the "OODA Loop" — is a model for understanding the type of rapid decision-making that is required in combat. Originally developed after a study of fighter pilots in the Korean War, the Boyd Cycle reflects the need for warriors, especially leaders, to rapidly take in information, make sense of it, and focus on what's really important in determining their next action or decision. The danger is always "sensory overload" as one tries to focus on the massive amount of information on the battlefield. In order to be successful, one must "orient" on what's vital to the decision that must be made, using that information to determine the appropriate action. The side that can do this most rapidly and effectively invariably wins in combat.)

Applying this principle has significant implications for leader certification programs at all levels. Long a part of the Army's training methodology, leader certification now becomes even more important in the preparation for a training event. The old "turnkey" method of instructing will no longer suffice. Merely showing up and reciting a rehearsed script will not serve to nurture initiative or adaptability. When a Soldier asks, "Why do we do that?" the reply cannot be "Because that is how we always do it" or "Because the manual says so." All of these responses really translate to "I don't know what I am doing." This exposes the trainer as a fraud to those that he is supposed to be training. The natural reaction of the Soldier will be confusion, and the supposed trainer will have lost legitimacy.

Instead, instructors must have the ability to explain not only how to do things but also why things are done. They must have the patience to let trainees struggle, experiment, and even fail at times in an effort to learn on their own through experience (within reason). Additionally, they must have the skill to lead highly effective after action reviews that bring the intended lessons to the forefront of discussion. Therefore, the selection of instructors/trainers and their accompanying certification are absolutely critical. Without the right types of officers and NCOs in charge, the training event will devolve into the unthinking execution of drills or processes without any broader context.

(3) "<u>Take away the safety blanket.</u>" Remove the senior officer and NCO leadership at key points during training and have junior leaders take charge. What better way is there to inspire the exercise of initiative? This sounds simple enough, but far too many senior leaders refuse to "let go" and force their subordinates to step up. Commanders or their designated observer/controllers should remove the "safety blanket" from the first-line leader by deliberately cutting off communications with higher headquarters in selected situations where the circumstances have changed dramatically from what was originally anticipated. It must be such that quick action is necessary in order to remove the option of delaying until communications can be re-established. This requires the junior leader to exercise initiative in the absence of precise instructions. The young officer or NCO must clearly understand the higher

SGT Michael Pryor

Soldiers with the 2nd Battalion, 325th Airborne Infantry Regiment set up a local support-by-fire position during a combined arms live fire at Fort Bragg, N.C., on 17 September.

headquarters' intent for the operation so that he can make a sound judgment in response to the new situation. This technique works especially well during missions where the junior leader is dealing with civilian figures such as a village elder, tribal sheik, or possibly even members of the international press. Experiences such as this during training get young officers and NCOs accustomed to the idea of taking action and making decisions without a senior leader looking over their shoulder. They also learn the importance of conducting themselves in accordance with the rules of engagement, the guidelines of the current IO campaign, and the intent of higher headquarters. These are the types of challenges that await them in combat today.

(4) "Get rid of the script." Collective tactical exercises should not follow a choreographed script. If events unfold the same way regardless of the actions taken by the Soldiers and leaders on the ground, then it implies that their decisions have no consequences. Nothing could be farther from the truth, especially on today's complex, politically-sensitive battlefields. Fixing this problem necessitates the elimination of discrete "lanes" or, at least, making these lanes transparent to those being trained. Too often the transition from one "lane" to another becomes an "administrative move," and the actions taken during the last engagement are all but forgotten as units move quickly on to the next task. There must be an over-arching scenario that includes not only tactical objectives but also operational objectives from higher headquarters. This allows leaders at all levels to place their actions and decisions into context of the "big picture." A free-thinking set of role-players posing as the enemy and the local population is also required. If the training "lanes" are not interconnected, units do not experience the long-term consequences of immediate actions or decisions. The context, usually embodied in the higher commander's intent, is essential for the execution of disciplined initiative and, therefore, vital to the exercise of mission command.

(5) "Let's make sure we really understand what discipline is!" Perhaps it is easier to first define what discipline is *not*. Doing things blindly without question is not discipline. Any fool can follow orders even when those orders are overcome by events and no longer make sense. True discipline is doing the right thing no matter the circumstances. Sometimes the "right" thing is to follow the last order given. At other times, it is to disobey the last order and adjust to the changed situation. Soldiers must follow the intent of their leaders, making adjustments whenever the situation on the ground makes deviation from the "plan" necessary.

Unfortunately, leaders too often equate discipline with a clean and polished appearance or with uniformity, but neither of these necessarily equates to true discipline. For example, having a standard load plan for all combat vehicles in a company makes sense because it allows everyone in the unit to quickly locate critical equipment on every vehicle. However, it makes no sense to reprimand a deviation from the load plan on a vehicle crew when there is a valid reason to do so. In fact, a commander's standing rule for subordinates should be this: *don't call and ask for permission to do something that you already know is the right thing to do . . . instead, call and inform me that you have already done it!*

Regardless of whether you are leading an Infantry platoon, cavalry troop, or forward support battalion, the burden of victory will be carried by young Soldiers, sergeants and junior officers. We cannot micro-manage them during training and then expect them to fight with aggressiveness and initiative once we get to the combat theater.

Conclusion

The five principles described above are not definitive. Any intelligent leader might think of others to add to this list, and there are many different (and better) ways to describe the ones already included. However, these five simple principles constitute a solid foundation on which to build. If we, as leaders, want to execute mission command with our units in combat, we have to do our part *before* we reach the battlefield. We have to nurture disciplined initiative in our subordinates through our approach to training. We have to effectively communicate our intent and then set our subordinates free to operate within that intent. This is what will occur in combat, so why not start now?

Nothing stated above is really new, and these five principles are completely consistent with existing Army doctrine. However, there is a tendency among many officers and NCOs to "dumb down" training. Risk aversion and a lack of understanding of what it takes to fight and win on today's battlefields at the lowest levels are the root causes of this problem. If trainers treat Soldiers as if they cannot be trusted to exercise good judgment, then this is exactly what the result will be! On the other hand, if Soldiers are, from the beginning, made accountable for their own actions and *required* to think on their feet, this will produce war-fighters that are capable of exercising disciplined initiative without the benefit of a senior leader directing their every move. The stakes are high and the pressure is heavy on the shoulders of our young warriors, but higher level commanders cannot realistically hope to mitigate risk by micro-managing the actions of squad leaders and platoon leaders. Brigade, battalion and company commanders cannot be everywhere, so the only way to mitigate this risk is to properly prepare our Soldiers and units for the challenges that await them. Regardless of whether you are leading an Infantry platoon, cavalry troop, or forward support battalion, the burden of victory will be carried by young Soldiers, sergeants and junior officers. We cannot micro-manage them during training and then expect them to fight with aggressiveness and initiative once we get to the combat theater. Tough, realistic training has always been imperative for Army leaders, and in order to meet today's challenges, we need only to keep this in mind. In short, the solution is to train 'em like we want 'em to fight!

MAJ Chad Foster is an Armor officer currently assigned as an instructor with the Department of Military Instruction, U.S. Military Academy. He has served in various command and staff positions to include two company commands and two deployments to Iraq.